

Marta Tutko

Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: marta.tutko@uj.edu.pl

INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS IN POLISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE ESG 2015

Abstract

The article discusses the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) in the context of the previous ESG and explores the status of adaptation of the ESG by the Polish higher education institutions. This status of adaptation is rather good, however there are still some problems with its implementation, presented in the article. These problems might become great challenges for HEIs in adapting of the ESG 2015.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education institutions, ESG 2015

Streszczenie

Wewnętrzne systemy zapewniania jakości w polskich instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego w świetle ESG 2015

W artykule omówiono standardy i wskazówki dotyczące zapewniania jakości w Europejskim Obszarze Szkolnictwa Wyższego (ESG 2015) w kontekście poprzedniej wersji dokumentu ESG. Ponadto przedstawiono stan adaptacji ESG w polskich uczelniach, oceniony jako dobry, oraz zwrócono uwagę na problemy wynikające z wdrażania ESG. Problemy te mogą się stać wyzwaniem dla uczelni w dostosowaniu się do zapisów dokumentu ESG 2015.

Słowa kluczowe: zapewnianie jakości, instytucje szkolnictwa wyższego, ESG 2015

I. Introduction

In Poland, at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, there was a rapid, quantitative development of higher education. The increase occurred in the number of students and number of higher education institutions (HEI). In the most numerous academic year 2005/2006, the number of students was 1953 thousand and the number of HEIs was 445. Since 2006 the number of students in HEIs has

steadily declined. In the 2014/2015 academic year there were 1469 thousand students [*Higher Education Institutions and Their Finances in 2014, 2015*]. One of the consequences of this quantitative change of higher education was lowering the quality of education. The method to solve this problem was sought in the development of internal and external quality assurance.

The commitment to create internal quality assurance systems was formulated in Polish legislation for the first time in the year 2007. The government regulations in a very general way defined what internal quality assurance is, leaving the design and implementation of internal quality assurance systems to individual HEIs or their organizational units. Over the years, HEIs designed and implemented their own internal quality assurance systems models, but still, they are often seen as imperfect and inefficient.

In 2015, Bologna ministers adopted the revised version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015), which provides a common framework for internal and external quality assurance systems, in order to “improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness.” The ESG 2015 might be used by HEIs as a reference document for internal quality assurance systems. They apply to all higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area regardless of the mode of study or country.

The premises presented above define the objectives of this study, which are: to discuss the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) in the context of the previous ESG, to explore the status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions and to present the challenges that Polish HEIs may face in adapting of the new ESG 2015.

To realize the goals of the paper, the indirect research method of gathering information was used – “desk research” (secondary research). The main sources used to write the article were Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) Approved by the Ministerial Conference in May 2015 and Findings from the Survey on Part I of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Internal Quality Assurance Systems.

2. Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the european higher education area

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (commonly known as ESG) were adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory countries in 2005, during the Bergen meeting. Since that time, considerable progress has been made in quality assurance in countries involved in the Bologna Process. For this reason, in 2012, the ministers proposed to analyse and revise ESG “to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope” [*Making the Most of Our Potential...*, <http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/>

Bucharest-Communique-20121.pdf, access: 12.11.2015]. The ESG 2015 has been adopted at the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Conference held in Yerevan in 2015.

The main goal of the ESG 2015 is to “contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching in all EHEA countries and among all stakeholders” and the other aims are:

- They set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;
- They enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;
- They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA [*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015: 5–6].

The ESG 2015 are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. Standards set out practice for quality assurance, while guidelines describe how standards might be implemented. The ESG do not recommend how the quality assurance processes should be introduced, but they provide advice for educational quality provision.

The ESG 2015 focus on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education and they have been divided into three parts: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and quality assurance agencies. These three parts should be read and seen as a whole. However in his paper the attention is given to internal quality assurance.

There are ten standards for internal quality assurance proposed in the ESG 2015, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Standards for internal quality assurance in the ESG 2015

The standard for internal quality assurance	Description of the standard
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

The standard for internal quality assurance	Description of the standard
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle,” e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.
1.5. Teaching staff	Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.
1.6. Learning resources and student support	Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.
1.7. Information management	Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.
1.8. Public information	Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Source: own elaboration based on: *Standards...*, 2015.

The new version of the ESG 2015, compared with the previous one, includes an additional standard “Cyclical external quality assurance.” This standard links to Part 2 of ESG 2015, as the internal work undertaken by HEIs is directly relevant to an external quality assurance that they undergo. More attention has been paid to students, by formulating standards: “Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment” and “Student admission, progression, recognition and certification.” The previous standard “Information systems” in the new version of the document is called “Information Management.”

The comparison of the two ESG (adopted in 2005 and 2015) shows that the revised version make the ESG 2015 clearer and unequivocal to avoid potential confusion with their interpretation during the implementation process. Also the structure of the ESG 2015 is more explicit. The current document contains ten standards, while the former comprised seven. The part concerning internal quality assurance makes a more transparent connection to the learning and teaching process, Qualifications Frameworks as well as learning outcomes.

3. Internal quality assurance systems in Polish higher education institutions

In Poland, two types of quality assurance systems are present: internal (which apply to higher education institutions) and external (with the leading role of The Polish Accreditation Committee, which is the only statutory body in Poland responsible for assessment of quality of education provided by higher education institutions).

Implementation of the internal quality assurance system is a prerequisite to provide education on the first cycle, second cycle or long cycle programmes of study. According to the Polish law, internal quality assurance system refers to the whole process of education. It should take into account: the method of verifying learning outcomes throughout the process of education, the way of using outcomes from academic staff evaluations performed by students, the verification of the achieved intended learning outcomes, the conclusions from the analysis of monitoring graduates' careers in the labour market and action taken by HEIs aimed at the prevention of plagiarism [Rozporządzenie MNiSW, 2014].

The Polish law does not refer explicitly to ESG (adopted in 2005), however in the Law on Higher Education, the Polish Accreditation Committee was entrusted with external assessments of education quality. The Committee included internal quality assurance criteria in its methodology for institutional and programme evaluations and the compliance of its criteria with ESG was confirmed by European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education review procedures.

Internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions in Poland are characterized by the following features [Próchnicka, Tutko, 2015]:

- internal quality assurance systems constituted;
- internal regulations adopted;
- the formal, tailored HEI's systems structure implemented;
- responsibilities for processes to ensure quality divided;
- administrative units supporting the functioning internal quality assurance systems established;
- participation of representatives of all categories of stakeholders in the structures of systems provided;
- in most HEIs sets of evaluation, assurance and improvement procedures developed;
- systems for collecting data on key areas of assessment and quality assurance built.

Some of these views were confirmed by the outcomes of the research conducted by Izabela Kwiatkowska-Sujka and Mieczysław Socha. The authors observed that 84% of responding Polish HEIs (out of 116 who completed the questionnaire) confirm that their internal quality assurance systems have reached the stage of formal implementation. The remaining group declares that they have a number of procedures or a single procedure which do not yet form a system [Kwiatkowska-Sujka, Socha, 2015].

Maria Próchnicka and Marta Tutko conclude that the formation of specific, Polish model of internal quality assurance system of higher education, which consists primarily of: lack of a comprehensive nature, lack of stakeholder involvement, a high degree of bureaucratization has many causes. Among them there are legal conditions arising from the law as well as rush in the design and implementing quality assurance systems in HEIs, caused by the accumulation in one period many reforms in the higher education system [Próchnicka, Tutko, 2015b]. Reassuming, quality assurance systems in some higher education institutions in Poland are still imperfect and inefficient. To change this situation, the most desirable solution would be to strive to build a culture of quality.

4. Adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions

The development of the internal quality assurance and the implementation of the ESG by higher education institutions in Poland, as well as in other European countries, do not happen in a vacuum. They take place in a specific national and European context. The Bologna Process has emphasized several objectives, and quality assurance, which is one of them, has been a particularly important change driver in higher education across Europe.

Quality assurance and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, as shown by the report Trends 2015, has had high importance to 73% higher education institutions across the sample: “This is notably the case in Denmark (86%), Germany (88%), Italy (83%), Lithuania (100%), the Netherlands (89%), Poland (81%), Portugal (93%), Romania (83%), Russian Federation and Turkey (78%) and Sweden (86%)” [Sursock, 2015: 38].

The results of the research, presented in Trends 2015, reveal that an increasing number of institutions have institutional quality assurance policies and processes that are used for institutional planning and improvement. Also, the large majority of HEIs (63% of them) have institutional policies and processes [Sursock, 2015]. In comparison with the Trends 2010 [Sursock, Smidt, 2010] it seems so that there has been considerable development in internal quality processes in all countries across Europe.

The report Trends 2015 also shows the progression in the involvement of students in internal quality processes: 83% of institutions responding to the questionnaire state that their “students participate actively in quality assurance activities (i.e. as members of university or faculty QA committees)” [Sursock, 2015: 40].

To answer the question raised in the paper on the status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions, the results of research carried out by Izabela Kwiatkowska-Sujka and Mieczysław Socha were used. The survey was conducted in 2015 among 431 public and non-public HEIs (representing 100% of the total number of HEIs). 116 out of 431 HEIs (27%) completed the questionnaire.

In the opinion of the majority of responding HEIs (67%), internal quality assurance documents refer indirectly to the ESG as they are based on national legislation or national external evaluation criteria in which the ESG are integrated. 40% of the HEIs use the ESG as broad guidelines for selected elements of the internal quality assurance system. The rest of the HEIs use the ESG as an indicative checklist to ensure broad compliance with the ESG (23%). Often, the ESG are integrated into the institution's own standards and guidelines (in 13% cases) [Kwiatkowska-Sujka, Socha, 2015]. The status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

The status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by Polish higher education institutions

The standard for internal quality assurance	The status of adaptation of the standard
1.1. Policy for quality assurance	<p>55% of responding HEIs have a published policy for quality assurance that specify the structures and processes through which it is implemented; 18% have a policy for quality assurance that is not published; 5% of respondents admit that no policy for quality assurance has been developed yet.</p> <p>52% of HEIs involved external stakeholders in the development and implementation of their quality assurance; 19% of HEIs involved external stakeholders in the development but did not involve them in the implementation of the policy or vice versa; 6% of HEIs did not involve external stakeholders.</p>
1.2. Design and approval of programmes	<p>79% of HEIs operate a formal procedure for designing programmes for all fields of study; 83% of HEIs operate a formal procedure for the approval of programmes for all fields of study.</p> <p>78% of programmes are designed in line with the institutional strategy, mission statement and vision and with the objectives that have been set for them; 83% of HEIs clearly specified qualifications which refer to the relevant level of the National Qualifications Framework; 93% of HEIs define intended learning outcomes to be achieved by students and expected student workload in terms of ECTS.</p>
1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	<p>37% of HEIs provide programmes in different modes of delivery in most fields of study; 58% of HEIs offer flexible learning paths to students in all fields of study; 60% of HEIs use a variety of teaching and learning methods, including those which encourage active and interactive engagement of students in their learning in all fields of study.</p> <p>76% of HEIs publish student assessment procedures, methods and criteria; 72% have in place a procedure for students appeals and 58% a procedure to ensure consistency and fairness in student assessment.</p>
1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	<p>86% of HEIs apply consistent procedure(s) to ensure that their regulations concerning admission, progression, recognition and certification; 57% of HEIs have regulations on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in no field of study.</p>

The standard for internal quality assurance	The status of adaptation of the standard
1.5. Teaching staff	80% of HEIs have operated a transparent and fair recruitment process for teaching staff; 50% offer incentives to encourage the professional development of teaching staff; 61% provide professional development opportunities to teaching staff; 41% offer incentives to encourage innovation in teaching; 47% offer incentives to encourage the use of new technologies in teaching; 59% have in place mechanisms for rewarding teaching achievements; 86% regularly assesses teaching staff performance; 35% regularly monitors teaching staff satisfaction (in all fields of study).
1.6. Learning resources and student support	85% of HEIs provide to its students' academic and financial support; 90% provide advice and support to outgoing and incoming students; 65% have a mechanism for assessing whether student support is adequate and accessible.
1.7. Information management	83% of HEIs gather data on profile of student population and student progression, success and drop-out rates; 78% gather data on student satisfaction with their programmes; 78% gather data on indicators of graduates' employability.
1.8. Public information	68% of responding HEIs provide full information about their programmes, including admission criteria, full curricula, syllabuses with all names and contact details, intended learning outcomes, qualifications awarded and student assessment procedures; 24% provide selected information; 5% of HEIs do not provide any information about their programmes.
1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	69% of responding HEIs confirm that they operate procedures for ongoing monitoring and periodic programme reviews within all fields of study. 78% of responding HEIs confirm student involvement and 37% external stakeholders involvement in the process of programme monitoring and/or reviews.
1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance	47% of HEIs conclude that external quality assurance provided by Polish Accreditation Committee both encourages and hinders the development/enhancement of internal quality assurance to some extent.

Source: own elaboration based on: *Standards...*, 2015; Kwiatkowska-Sujka, Socha, 2015.

The status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions is rather good, however there are still some problems with its implementation which are reported by HEIs. These problems become great challenges for HEIs in adapting of the ESG 2015. These challenges for the majority of HEIs are:

1. Greater involvement of external stakeholders in the development and implementation of quality assurance.
2. Improvement in the process of programme designing and approval, with special focus on students' and external stakeholders' involvement.
3. Assessing student performance by more than one examiner.
4. More student-centered approach to learning and teaching.
5. Development of regulations and procedures on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.
6. Monitoring of teaching staff satisfaction.

7. Effective management of the programmes based on the relevant information for quality improvement or enhancement.
8. Involvement of external stakeholders as members of bodies responsible for programme monitoring and review with special focus on the verification of the achieved intended learning outcomes.

To fulfil the ESG 2015 requirements fully, Polish HEIs should remember, that according to the ESG, one of the principles for quality assurance is its role in supporting the development of quality cultures. Shaping the culture of quality should be realized not through the imposition of external systems of values and standards related to the quality, but by recognizing the values and standards, shared by academics and stakeholders of the specific HEI, by discussion and dissemination of good practices.

To fulfil the ESG 2015 requirements, internal quality assurance should be linked more explicitly with strategic management. Also, involvement of different actors in quality assurance should be an important issue. An impetus for institutional leaders and quality officers to revisit their quality policies is necessary too. As the effect of these activities and the implementation of the ESG 2015 the institution-wide commitment to quality might cause the development of quality cultures in Polish HEIs.

5. Discussion and closing remarks

Thanks to the Bologna reforms, a significant progress has been made in many areas of higher education, for example: in enabling students to move within the EHEA with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study, in the internationalization in higher education or in the development of the internal quality assurance systems.

Countries of the European Union have had different history and not the same traditions in their higher education, a specially in the context of internal quality assurance systems. Nationally organized quality assurance systems often emerged under pressure of societies for greater accountability of higher education institutions. These activities were pioneered by United Kingdom and the Netherlands, who had had a long history of development of quality assurance systems and quality culture. As an opposite example, there are countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, which had been under strict governmental regulation until the fall of communism. After regaining the national independence and with getting access to European programmes, higher education institutions could start to develop their own internal quality assurance systems. Another important facilitator of quality assurance was the Bologna Process, which started with the Bologna Declaration in which quality assurance was included among the main Bologna Process goals.

The EHEA is characterized by a diversity of approaches to internal quality assurance and these different approaches find their similarity in the Standards and

Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The implementation of ESG in the internal quality assurance was often more difficult than in the external one because the policies of higher education remain the incontestable domain of each country, as well as universities are autonomous and in many countries can establish quality assurance systems in their own way.

So far, in most EHEA countries there is no specific policy for implementing the ESG for internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, except for recommendations to accreditation bodies. There are also examples of HEIs that have started inscribing ESG into their internal quality assurance systems.

The status of adaptation of the ESG 2015 by the Polish higher education institutions, resulting from the studies conducted by Kwiatkowska-Sujka and Socha, is rather good. On the other hand, according to research carried out by Próchnicka and Tutko quality assurance systems in some higher education institutions in Poland are still imperfect and inefficient.

Certainly higher education institutions will face many challenges in adapting of the ESG 2015 in the coming years. To meet these challenges, Polish higher education institutions might use management methods and models that could be used to improve internal quality assurance systems. In the case of higher education institutions it might be reasonable to use the concept of quality management – the requirements of ISO 9000 and Total Quality Management. Also the development own model of quality management, including elements most appropriate for HEIs, due to its specificity and development strategy, is worth recommending.

It is worth to mention that management models can be used also in the process of self-assessment of the HEI. Self-assessment might be performed on the basis of the reference model, e.g. the EFQM Excellence Model or the Polish Quality Award Model.

The solutions for improving the internal quality assurance systems, possible or necessary to be implemented in HEIs, were proposed by Próchnicka and Tutko. The authors developed the model for internal quality assurance systems improvement in higher education institutions based on the Deming cycle [Próchnicka, Tutko, 2015a].

There are many goals of the higher education. Among others, they include preparing students for their future careers and supporting their personal and career development. The role of internal quality assurance is crucial in reinforcing higher education institutions in responding to the expectations of the students and other stakeholders. Stakeholders, who may have different purposes, can view quality in higher education differently and quality assurance needs to take into account these different perspectives.

It is also worth to mention that implementation of internal quality assurance systems causes numerous beneficial changes, such as: improvement of learning and teaching quality, development of academic teachers' competences, increase of external stakeholders' involvement in the development of programmes. Internal quality assurance also supports the development of a quality culture.

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